

# Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* in Mauritania: first breeding records

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La Fauvette à lunettes *Sylvia conspicillata* en Mauritanie: les données de nidification les plus méridionales. Des nouveaux sites de nidification de la Fauvette à lunettes *Sylvia conspicillata* ont été trouvés dans la région d'Adrar en Mauritanie au printemps de 2004. Ceux-ci constituent la première preuve de nidification pour le pays et les nidifications les plus méridionales en Afrique continentale. Au moins quatre nichées ont été observées dans les oasis d'Ouadâne et de Tenlaba. Un nid avec des oisillons a été découvert le 12 mars et des jeunes quittant le nid ont été vus le 25 mars, ce qui indique que la ponte avait commencé aux environs de la mi-février.

**S**pectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* breeds in the Mediterranean basin and North Africa (*S. c. conspicillata*) and on the north-east Atlantic islands of Madeira, the Canaries and Cape Verdes (*S. c. orbitalis*) (Cramp 1992, Urban *et al.* 1997, Shirihai *et al.* 2001). In north-west Africa its

breeding range extends from Morocco to north-west Libya. The species winters slightly to the south of the breeding range, with pockets further south, in coastal south-west Mauritania, north-west Senegal and northern Niger (Newby *et al.* 1987, Lamarche 1988, Rodwell *et al.* 1996,



Figure 1. Young Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*, showing juvenile body feathers with typical loose texture due to fewer and more spaced barbs, fresh primaries and growth bars in the tail, 16 March 2004, Ouadâne, Mauritania (V. Salewski)

Jeune Fauvette à lunettes *Sylvia conspicillata*. Notez les tectrices juvéniles à la texture lâche due aux barbes moins nombreuses et plus espacées, les primaires fraîches et les barres de croissance sur la queue, 16 mars 2004, Ouadâne, Mauritanie (V. Salewski)

Borrow & Demey 2001, Shirihai *et al.* 2001). Isolated records have been reported from coastal Gambia and central Mali (Barlow *et al.* 1997, Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 2005). Several authors have also reported the species from oases in central Mauritania such as Oudâne (Valverde 1957, Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962, Lamarche 1988, Salewski *et al.* 2005).

On 3 June 1955 Valverde (1957) observed a solitary juvenile at Aagueidat el Gaselan (25°50'N 12°55'W), in the Zemmour region, which covers part of Mauritania and the extreme south-east of the former Rio de Oro region (modern-day West Saharan Morocco), and thought it might have hatched in the area. Heim de Balsac & Mayaud (1962) recorded displaying pairs of Spectacled Warbler in the same region, in mid-February, and stated that in all likelihood two pairs were successful, but proof was lacking. In sum, despite these observations no actual evidence of breeding by Spectacled Warblers exists for Mauritania, hence occurrence in the Zemmour region was only indicated by a question mark on the distribution map in Shirihai *et al.* (2001), and is not marked at all in Cramp (1992). According to Thévenot *et al.* (2003), breeding occurred in the Saquiat Al-Hamra, close to Layoune (27°09'N 13°12'W), this referring to Valverde's (1957) observations at Aium *c.*22 km from the coast. According to the last-named author males were singing there during mid to late-May 1955, but neither a nest nor unfledged juveniles were found. Thus, we conclude that the clutch of five well-grown juveniles in Goulimine (28°56'N 10°04'W), in the Lower Draa, on 14 March 1952, is the southernmost confirmed breeding site of Spectacled Warblers in Africa (Bannerman & Bannerman 1953).

In February–May 2004, the Swiss Ornithological Institute carried out intensive ornithological observations at two oases in the Adrar region of Mauritania, *c.*500 km from the Atlantic coast. Mist-netting was undertaken on 16 March–8 May at Tenlaba (20°59'N 11°41'W) in a date palm *Phoenix reclinata* plantation and riparian vegetation, and on 7 March–8 May at Oudâne (20°54'N 11°35'W) in *Acacia tortilis* / *Balanites aegyptiaca* woodland. Additionally, daily counts were made throughout the ringing period along a line transect of 1 km, situated *c.*2 km north-east of Oudâne. The ringing sites were *c.*11 km apart.

On 9 March an adult female Spectacled Warbler with a brood patch was mist-netted at Oudâne and colour-ringed. On 19 March the same bird was observed carrying food and showing agitated behaviour; the following day a nest was found in the vicinity. The nest was 30 cm above ground in a 50 cm-high *Balanites aegyptiaca* bush heavily coppiced by livestock. It contained four almost full-grown pulli with remiges emerging one-third from the sheath. They left the nest on 25 March. In the following weeks groups of young birds were seen around the ringing site, but as the nestlings were not marked individually their provenance was uncertain.

Single Spectacled Warblers were mist-netted and ringed at Oudâne on 19 and 23 March, and at Tenlaba on 4 April. Skull ossification was incomplete, indicating first-year birds (Svensson 1992). Furthermore, a group of three first-years resembling a family group, aged by the soft texture and fluffy character of their body feathers (Jenni & Winkler 1994), was observed regularly near the transect at Oudâne between 12 and 29 March. Subsequently, single first-years were seen regularly near the transect and the mist-nets until 8 May. At Tenlaba three Spectacled Warblers were seen four times between 18 and 29 March, but we are unsure as to whether they were in a family group or not. Four female-plumaged birds resembling a family group were observed at Tenlaba on 21 April. These records suggest that there were at least four successful broods of Spectacled Warbler in the Oudâne/Tenlaba area in 2004: (1) the mist-netted first-years at Oudâne on 19 and 23 March, (2) the fledglings from the nest at Oudâne, (3) the group of three first-years at Oudâne on 12–29 March, and (4) the four female-plumaged birds at Tenlaba on 21 April.

Mean incubation and nestling periods of Spectacled Warbler is 12–13 and 10–12 days respectively (Shirihai *et al.* 2001). In Morocco, breeding commences progressively later with increasing latitude. In the Tafilalt region, eastern Moroccan Sahara, breeding starts as early as the beginning of April (Thévenot *et al.* 2003). There is, however, a record from Goulimine, south-west Morocco, of five well-grown pulli on 14 March, suggesting egg laying in mid–late February (Bannerman & Bannerman 1953). As laying usually takes place *c.*22–25 days before the young leave the nest, the clutch of the fledglings which

we observed on 12 March must have been initiated around mid February. Therefore, breeding was as early as the earliest previous record on Africa's mainland and confirms previous observations.

Given that no proven breeding records are available from Mauritania, our observations are the southernmost breeding records on the African mainland and the first for Mauritania. Ouadâne is situated c.800 km south of the Goulimine region, from whence comes the previous southernmost record (Bannerman & Bannerman 1953). Interestingly, no breeding records were obtained in spring 2003 when intensive observations were made at the same localities at the same time of year. Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer (1991) suspect breeding by the Zemmour 'population' only in years after heavy autumnal rains. Autumn 2003 brought an unusual amount of rainfall to north-west Africa (Swiss Ornithological Institute, unpubl. data), which might have induced Spectacled Warblers to breed in central Mauritania.

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